

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW OF

CHARLES MARTIN FRAAS

NOVEMBER 7, 2009

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Transcription date: November 7, 2009

MS. FRAAS: All right. Today is November 7th, 2009 and we are interviewing Mr. Martin Charles Fraas at Anoka Technical College. Mr. Fraas is 47 years old, having been born on April 8th, 1962. And my name is Brittany Fraas and I will be the interviewer. Also present at the interview are Michelle Foley. And Mr. Fraas is a resident of Jefferson City, Missouri. All right. So we're going to start with questions now.

Q Where and when were you born?

A I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, April 8th, 1962.

Q What were your parents' occupations?

A My father, Charles Fraas, was a lawyer, and mom, Judy Fraas, was initially a homemaker and then went to work for the State of Missouri for 20 years.

Q How many siblings do you have and what gender are they?

A I have two younger sisters, Julia and Sheila, and then I have a younger brother named Matthew.

Q What were you doing before entering the service?

A Before I entered the Marine Corps I was currently going to college at the time in Kansas City, Missouri.

Q Do you have other families who served in the military?

A I have my father; he was in the Marine Corps Reserves. He got out 19 -- I'm taking a wild guess here -- '66, '68, somewhere in there. Even if it was that late. And then I had an uncle who served in the Air Force,

another uncle who served in the Army. I have a cousin that served in the Air Force also, and then my brother Matthew served in the Army.

Q What war and branch of service did you serve in?

A I was in the United States Marine Corps for 26 years. First combat experience was Panama in 1989, then I did Desert Storm '91, and then three trips to Iraq between 2002 and 2006.

Q And what was your rank?

A For Panama I was a sergeant, for Desert Storm I was a sergeant, and then for my first trip to Iraq I was a gunnery sergeant, and then last two trips I was a master sergeant.

Q How did you enter the service: draft or enlistment?

A When I came in, I joined in 1981, there was no draft anymore, it was a selective service, which meant you went to the post office and signed up in case there ever was a draft again. But, no, I actually went down to the recruiter and volunteered myself.

Q Why did you choose the Marines as your branch of service?

A Why did I choose the Marines. I think for most people that join the Marine Corps it was something the matter of you wanted to prove something to yourself, you know, could you hack the training because, you know,

everybody hears the stories about how tough the marines are, and it was tough, yes, but, you know, I think if I was going to join any branch, you know, I don't know, that was just the one that I wanted to do so that's where I went.

Q Tell me about your departure for training camp and early days of training.

A For recruit training, boot camp, I left, flew out of Kansas City, landed in San Diego. As most of the cases, especially in marine recruit training, they always try and make sure you get there at nighttime so you're disorientated. You get on a bus, you get -- they drive you from San Diego International Airport to MCRD San Diego. And it's probably about midnight, one o'clock in the morning, you really don't know what to expect, and all of a sudden this drill instructor gets on the bus, starts screaming and yelling, Get out! Get on these little yellow footprints they have spray painted on the ground on the deck out there and you go stand on these footprints and commence ten weeks of training at the time. I mean that was so long ago for me though as far as what the first days were like so it's just, you know, I mean everybody goes through a culture shock. You're away from home, the regimented lifestyle, having to snap to orders all the time, so, I

mean, it was just -- but, hey, I survived so that's what -- so that was it.

Q Did you have any specialized training?

A Well, through 26 years, yeah, you tend to specialize in a few things. I think my specialized training, I was a Marine Corps drill instructor which was an additional ten-week school which came later in my career, and then I went through Marine Corps Sniper School which is probably one of the harder schools I've been to for mental and physical stamina and endurance. That was ten weeks also. And then there's just so many other little specialized schools you go to in the Marine Corps through your 26 years tour. I mean I'm an infantryman by trade with the secondary as a sniper so, but there's all kinds of other schools you go to to learn various things so -- too many to list here.

Q What was it like adapting to military life such as the physical regimen, barracks, food, and social life?

A Having gone to Catholic schools all my life I guess, you know, the military wasn't that big a surprise as far as discipline and having to do things by the book so to speak. But I think, you know, now that I'm retired one of the things that you end up missing the most is the camaraderie that you have with the, your fellow marines. When I first came in we lived in open

squad bays where you could have up to 60 people in a long room, you know, you had twin metal racks, a little desk, a wall locker, maybe a little chest of drawers on the end, and you and another guy lived in that section of the squad bay. Obviously though as time progressed the military, all branches of service have gone to, you know, individual rooms, have not, you know, double rooms where you have your own restroom, and some have a communal like living space with the bedroom spaced around it and they'll have like a little kitchenette. Maybe I'm too, as we say, old corps, but I kind of miss the open squad bay barracks because it made everybody hang together, made everybody tight. You got to know the ins and outs of everybody. Nowadays with the separate rooms and stuff, I mean, a person can go in there and hide away and you'd never see this guy unless he showed up to formation and when you're out doing training so, I don't know, but, you know, I guess that's just keeping in times, keeping pace with the times so-

Q Okay. This is about your war time service. And where did you serve?

A My first combat experience was Panama 1989. I was with Third battalion 5th Marines. I was an acting sniper at the time. We were down there attached to the army's

Ninth Light Infantry Division. We operated in and around and in a town in the canal zone called Gamboa. I think the thing that struck me most about the town of Gamboa was how much it looked like Fort Lauderdale. It was just like little cottages set back in these little nice well manicured lawns, palm trees, you know, just really well maintained and well kept, and it was just really eerie going down these streets 02, 03 in the morning and it was almost like you were walking through someplace in the USA. That was kind of a disturbing thought in a way, but -- but fighting in the jungle was not one of my favorite things, too thick, too dark, too gloomy, too hot and humid, everything practically rotted off me just due to the humidity down there. And I'm sure the, the real war vets from like, fought in the jungle campaigns in World War II can allude to that more. You can't see things, sound is muffled, so I think there was an extra edge of tension fighting in someplace like that.

My next four combat experiences were all in the desert, Desert Storm. We took a ship over there from Camp Pendleton, the USS Dubuque. She was being decommissioned at the time when the war broke out so we actually sailed, as we sailed we went through the Philippines. And we had a civilian tech crew on board

trying to replace everything that they had taken off prior, because, like I said, they were going to decommission her so they were trying to put everything back on her as we were sailing over and then they disembarked in the Philippines. We spent New Years Eve in the Philippines, and then we finished sailing around into the gulf, conducted an amphibious landing, landed at the very northern end of Saudi Arabia and we kind of got our vehicles and we hooked into Kuwait from there.

I just remember mostly about that big sand storm the first night we were in. You know, for most, almost, you know, probably 80 percent of the unit I was with, again I was with Third Battalion 5th Marines at that time also, they never experienced a combat situation. And it was dark, they didn't know what was going on, everybody's a little nervous on edge, so, but at least in the desert, unlike the jungle, at least in the desert you can see or hear things coming from a long way away, so, you know, that sense of anticipation is not as bad as it was when you were in the jungle because you could see it coming, you had time to prepare.

And I just remember also the lack of sleep. I don't think I slept for the entire 100 hours that the war, they considered the war. But we actually saw most

of our action after the war was officially over. We were ordered to clear and zone going back south down towards Saudi Arabia to pick up any Iraqi stragglers. So a lot of these republican die-hard guys who didn't want to surrender were left behind. We were responsible for clearing them out. So, like I said, for -- we saw a little bit. Not as much as like Task Force Papa Bear and Task Force Ripper, but we saw a little bit. And then, like I said, most of our real action took place after the war dealing with these die-hards.

Then Iraq, it was weird going back to Iraq. For the invasion we went into Kuwait and prestaged. I ended up actually prestaging at the base to go into Iraq. That was the last place we hit in Desert Storm in Kuwait. Trying to think of the name of the air base here. It was, I want to say Jalappa but I can't remember if that was the one we used in Iraq or if that was the one in Kuwait. Either way, it was just weird being back at the base that we had taken during Desert Storm, now here I am 15 years later staging out of it to go back into Iraq.

And then the big thing on the second trip over we did Fallujah. That was -- well, enough said on that.

Third trip was no big deal. By then everything

was pretty much pacified. Still a few roadside bombs to deal with.

Q What was the trip abroad like? You basically just answered that.

A Yeah. Well, I mean, keeping in mind, I know we're here about wartime experiences, but having spent 26 years in the Marine Corps I did, especially with the marines, you know, you do these six-month deployments. It used to be you'd be home for 18 months and you'd go out for six, then you're home for 18 and you're out for six. So being with the First Marine Division out of Camp Pendleton, California I got to see most of the Far East: Hong Kong, Singapore before it went to the -- or Hong Kong when it was still British and before it turned to Chinese, and I got to go to Hong Kong after it was Chinese. Not much of a difference. You really couldn't tell. Philippines, Korea, which was one of my favorite countries. Never would want to fight a war there but nice place to visit. Indonesia, Malaysia. Been to the holy of holies in the Marine Corps, Iwo Jima. Actually reinlisted on Top of Mount Suribachi. So, yeah, I've traveled pretty much all over the Far East. And then obviously all my combat experiences were in the Middle East.

As far as Panama goes, we happened to be there by

accident. We were actually down in Panama doing jungle warfare school which is how we got tapped into that since we happened to be there, so our portion of the campaign in Panama was called -- we did these operations called sand flea ops and that was our portion of just cause, which was actually before the war had actually really broke out. We were kind of doing these things to provoke the Panamanians but it didn't quite blow into the full long thing that I think everybody was hoping for, but that came later.

Q Okay. What action did you witness or if you didn't witness any what was your duty away from the front line?

A I don't think you want me to answer that. So what were my duties in the combat zone?

Q Sure.

A Well, I mean, obviously I'm a sniper so like -- trying to think of a good way to describe that. I mean, yes, I mean, yes, everybody visualizes, but Panama we did two- to four-man observation teams on points of interest. Like we had a women's prison that we observed that was being used by the Panamanian defense forces, snooping around out there in the jungle. Got close enough where the guard was walking around and he stopped to take a pee on the bush and basically we were

right under the bush and he still didn't see us. And I was also the security team leader for the battalion commander.

Desert Storm I was a, the chief scout sniper and I was responsible for inserting and pickup of my sniper teams. And then I did a mission where I went down and observed a breach that we were going to make the next morning through an Iraqi minefield slash barrier field. Then there was a town, and I don't remember the name of it, we got in and I was again providing overhead sniper fire through the town while the battalion was pushing through.

Desert Storm I was with Marine Wing Support Squadron 373 as their infantry advisor. They'd never been to war with a, like a squadron gunny, with an infantry guy, it had been peacetime since that type of thing had been established, so I kind of had to invent the job myself so I spent a lot of time working with the EOD teams, explosive ordinance disposal, and the MPs working convoys dealing with explosive devices, improvised explosive devices, convoy security, you know. As a gunnery sergeant I was in charge of the convoy security.

On the second trip over again I attached myself with EOD and MPs, MWSS 373, did Fallujah. That's all

I'll say on that one.

And then on the third trip over, basically because everything had calmed down there was really nothing for me to do so on the third trip I just kind of was trying to find stuff to do and was bored most of my time over there on the third trip so-

Q How did you feel about witnessing casualties and destruction?

A Better than me. I think that's a natural, I think that's a natural feeling though. I mean everybody -- I'm talking about enemy casualties now. As far as friendly casualties go, that's never easy, especially when you're the leader and the people that you had to go out and order to do stuff end up being casualties, you feel obviously a lot of responsibility for that, what if you had done something different or thought of a different way. But, you know, having spent so much time in prior to all these conflicts breaking out it, you know, I've had time over the years to prepare myself mentally for those unfortunate occasions, and thankfully while it did happen to me it just wasn't as bad as say, for instance, somebody in World War II, Korean and Vietnam vets who may have seen casualties on a much more regular basis as far as friendly casualties go. I saw plenty of bad guys that -- and again, all I

thought about was better than me.

And again, as a sniper you have to kind of have a certain sense of detachment, a professional, I don't want to say cold-bloodedness, but you got to have a certain psychological profile that I seem to fit because it really doesn't bother me. It's not to say it won't come back and haunt me in years down the road but we'll worry about that when it happens.

Destruction. I think the worst destruction I ever saw though obviously was Fallujah. That was just a mess. That's what I'll say about that.

Q What friendships did you form?

A Friendships in the military are funny. You know, you can sweat, cry, and bleed with a guy, be best of buddies, hang out 24/7, and then you go to different units and you'll never talk to the guy again except maybe once in a blue moon which, most people would find odd, but I think the military just kind of tends to -- you get those close friendships like that but eventually you know, especially for the people that are going to spend a, like I did, 26 years in, you know you're going to move around a lot, move from point A to point B, especially this was back in the age before the internet and cell phones and all that kind of stuff so, you know, the only way you were going to keep track

of somebody was basically write a letter, which nobody really took the time to do, so hopefully you'd run into this guy five, six years down the road at a military school you happen to both be attending or something like that or a military function of some sort and you'd pick up like you had never split apart so it's, I don't know, military friendships are kind of like that. You know, I mean, even now that I'm out of the Marine Corps out of all the people I considered my friends there's only maybe one, two, three that I even bother to keep track of on any kind of regular basis. And when I mean regular basis I'm talking maybe once every other month or something I may send a text message now, but that doesn't mean that if they weren't to call me up and say, Hey, you know, I need your help, that I wouldn't be on the next plane there or drive myself there to help them out with whatever so-

Q How did you stay in touch with your family and friends back home?

A Back in the old days it was by snail mail; letters, phone calls when you could get to an overseas phone. When I was in Korea doing a team spirit exercise in '88 we went to a camp called Camp Muchuk, and there were only two phones on this base that were able to call out overseas and, so like, once you came in, I mean like

everybody and their brother went to go use these phones, so I stood in line for like three hours to call my wife at the time and that was -- yeah. So when I finally got on the phone that's when I found out I was getting a divorce. But that's neither here nor there. But -- yeah. But so back in the day it was just basically, you know, regular mail. Now obviously even now in the combat zones over in Iraq, I mean, you can have instant conductivity via computers, and people have the international cell phones with the international cell plans so nowadays it's almost like being at a base stateside as far as being able to talk to friends and family back home which makes it -- I don't know if that's a blessing or a curse because, you know, when you're far away and you have to concentrate on things, especially in a combat zone, that's all you want to concentrate on. And back in the old days when it was snail mail and that's all you had to rely on. There wasn't that overriding concern of what's going on at home, what's happening, because you just knew you had to wait for the mail and so be it. But now, you know, like I said, instant conductivity. You could go out on a combat mission and have all kinds of stuff happen and then come back and two hours later being on a computer talking to friends and family back home.

That can have its pluses, but can also be a distraction.

Q What did you do for recreation or off duty pursuits?

A Well, you know, there's that old adage about how combat is 98 percent boredom and two percent pure terror and I still think that holds true. During the down time a lot of Spades. And again, this was, you know -- I guess I was in the military during that big transition time of all of a sudden having barely any kind of electronics to being practically overboard with them. I can remember Desert Storm I finally broke down and bought a Game Boy and I thought I was like the hottest thing around. I'm like, Ah, Game Boy this is sweet. Nowadays, I mean, there's guys over in Iraq with their Xboxes PlayStations, but, you know, team sports and down time is also still good. People still like to go out -- softball has always been a big popular military sport. It's kind of hard some of these places in Iraq, but I can remember like prior deployments, I'll be in like Singapore, Hong Kong especially out in the Far East soccer was always a big deal so we always played, put together a soccer team to play the, you know, the host countries, whatever, their military. Like I played against Korean marines, I played against some dockyard workers in Singapore, a British team in Hong

Kong, but, you know, the combat zone part, basically if you're not actually out doing missions you're either sleeping or cleaning your gear or, you know -- and I'm talking about the combat guys. I can't really speak for the people who aren't necessarily, go outside the wire, but, you know, you still play a lot of cards, Spades, poker, read a lot, listen to your music on your Ipods. I mean back in the day Sony Walkman was the big deal so-

Q Okay. Now these questions are more about like coming home and when the war is ended and stuff like that.

Where were you when the war ended?

A With Panama we simply flew back into March Air Force Base in California and then took the bus back down to Camp Pendleton. Keeping in mind we actually, we actually got back before war was actually declared. And I know that's kind of hard to make sense of, but, like I said, we were down there doing these sand fleas ops which we still considered combat operations because, you know, we had full weapons and gear locked and loaded and we were out patrolling trouble, but we were down there and we were due to deploy in February or March on our regular six months deployment to the Far East so they wanted to get us back, so a battalion of the 82nd Airborne went down and replaced us, and

then like two days after we got back they actually conducted the invasion, so we called our part kind of the shadow war.

Desert Storm we flew back into March Air Force Base, took the bus, and it was, you know, there it was like, where I finally saw like the crowds on the side of the street waving the flags and people were holding up signs and banners and, you know, welcoming us home and calling us heroes and I didn't know quite what to make of that and I kind of felt bad for the guys from Vietnam who didn't get that. I kind of wished they were there with us so they could have got some of that too.

Iraq, you know, on the way back home after the initial invasion we flew in through Maine -- well, we stopped in Maine and then flew back out to California, but -- and I still think they even do it now, there's some group or organization up there that's always in the airport to greet, meet and greet military personnel coming and going from, from the Middle East. And again that, you know, with the big parades and everything like that, that was pretty nice. But now that the war's been going on so long it's almost become routine I guess. It's just kind of like you go, you do your job over there and you come back and there's no more

real big hoopla just because nowadays if you join the military you're almost guaranteed to go to your Afghanistan or Iraq in some sort of fashion and, and coming home, like I said, now it's just got to the point it's kind of become like a regular deployment except obviously the fact that all of you who went, some of you may not be coming back so, but, yep.

Q Well, you just explained this, but how did you return home?

A They chartered civilian airlines so we -- for instance, when you're in Iraq normally we'd fly helicopters or C-130s out of Iraq down into Kuwait and then from Kuwait you go to Kuwait International and you jump on the civilian airliner. Now I'm pretty sure they fly straight into Baghdad International but that wasn't an option, they were still kind of hot around there. Nobody obviously wanted to lose a civilian airliner full of troops to missile fire or something like that so they'd take us down into Kuwait and fly out.

Q How were you received by your family and the community?

A It was awesome. Obviously your mom and dad are always glad to see that their proverbial black sheep of a son has come home safe and sound. It's stressful on the family, and I've always wondered what would ever happened had I, one of my daughters or my current

granddaughter if they every went in the military, how I would feel as a parent, but, you know, at the time I really didn't have time to worry about that because I was too concentrated on making sure that everybody that I was with, that I did my best to make sure they all came back home in one piece to see their family and loved ones so -- but it was nice.

Q What was readjustment to civilian life like?

A Let's see. I've been retired a year and I'm not sure I'm all the way readjusted. And it's funny, you always read about it, hear about it, I personally especially from combat vets, I can't stand the 4th of July, it just trips me out too much anymore. I don't like the explosives and the fireworks. Car backfires I still jump. When I'm driving, especially having doing convoy ops, if I see -- and this was really bad when I first got home and I've pretty much shaken this, but I can remember when I first got home I was driving down the highway and there were things I saw on one side of the highway that made me nervous and I would jet across four streams of traffic at 90 miles an hour, this is on like I-5 in California, just to get over to the opposite lane, you know, before I realized what I was doing. But, you know, I think I'm fairly well adjusted. And I'm not sure if that has to do with the

fact that I had 26 years and, in the military and I had, I'd been in for eight years before I saw my first combat tour so I had time, I had eight years of training under my belt to prepare, to mentally adjust. And each combat tour is different so it never gets any easier. But I feel really sorry for these guys who, you know -- and again, it's more like the World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam vets where these guys, and even now, straight -- recruit training, straight to their MOS schools and then straight to a combat zone. You don't have any time to mentally prepare yourself for what you can encounter there. So, you know, I feel sorry for those guys. Especially now, you know, you've got young E-3s, E-4s in the Marine Corps that have already got three, four trips into Iraq and they're still on their first enlistment, and I know that's, that has got to be extremely extremely hard for them to deal with. I mean, like I said, I was in eight years before I saw my first combat tour so at least I had time to always mentally prepare and train for the worst possible thing to happen. They don't even get that nowadays so -- but that's what it is.

Q Did you stay in contact with fellow veterans over the years?

A Oh, yeah. Like I said, I have, there's three guys that

I keep track of on a regular basis. We're all bonded to each other in special ways for certain things that happened while we were there on tours. So, yeah, I keep on track with them. And it's good -- one thing about veterans is, and especially ones that you shared the same experiences with, it's always easier to talk with them than it is to come up to people who haven't been there or experienced that and try and explain to them what it was like to be there because no matter how well you describe it or how good a job you think you do, people who are nonmilitary really don't grasp the why's and the how's of it all. Especially since we were all volunteers, you know. Your World War II guys, they were drafted, your Vietnam guys, Korean War guys, they were drafted, they didn't have a choice.

Everybody that comes in the military today, you had a choice whether you wanted to do that or not and the choice was knowing, hey, I'm going to go to Afghanistan or Iraq and I still volunteered to join the military. And for some of these guys and gals it only makes sense after they got in to that they understand, okay, this is why I joined. But again, for those who never have, that's, it's kind of hard to explain it to them. Kind of like this interview.

Q Are you a member of any veterans organizations?

A I belong to the VFW, yes.

Q All right. And these are just some reflection questions.

How did your wartime experiences affect your life?

A Well, the fact that I can't call any place home now longer than six months before I just got to get up and move. I'm not sure if I can attribute that to 26 years in the Marine Corps or just got some sort of psychological issue with staying put in one spot too long anymore. But -- I can't say necessarily it was the wartime experiences but just the overall experience of being in the military. Most of the wartime experiences I got you'd rather put away and not think about, but there are the other benefits of 26 years in the military, you know, as far as the discipline and the, the ability just to go out and function when everything else is just going totally wrong, you know, the can-do attitude, my outlook on life. Every day now I'm just a little more thankful that I can wake up in the morning and still be here. So, yeah, you know, I put up with a lot of hardships and lot of BS in 26 years, you know, and like I said, over the years those bad times tend to fade away and the good times will stick around longer, but I have no regrets.

Q What life lessons did you learn from military service?

A Live each day to its fullest because you never know if you're going to be here tomorrow.

MS. FRAAS: All right. And I just want to say thank you, Mr. Fraas, for allowing me to interview you today. We appreciate your dedication, sacrifice, and service to our country.

MR. FRAAS: You're more than welcome, Miss Brittany Fraas.